



Meet the Eclectus Group

by Sandee L. Molenda
Specialty Organization Vice President

Formed in early 2000, the Eclectus Group was formalized last May to bring together the Eclectus breeders, provide a site for data on the keeping and breeding of Eclectus Parrots, and to establish a discussion list for information sharing. This group is managed by a Board of Directors: Constance Bacon, Joe Baker, David Ivey, Cathy Kelly, and Gloria Scholbe, and chaired by Laurella Desborough. Graham Taylor of Australia is Overseas Consultant. Brian Speer, DVM is Veterinary Advisor. At present there are 69 members in the group.

The Mission Statement of the Eclectus Group is to provide members with reliable information on diet, housing, husbandry, health, disease, subspecies identification, and management.

Their goals: Interface with the American Zoo Association/Private Bird Cooperative Working Groups as a representative for the Eclectus subspecies, and work to preserve the purity of the subspecies in captivity.

The Eclectus Group's special projects include:

- Internet discussion list for breeders.
- Creation of a web-site presenting reliable information.
- Promotion of the sale and purchase of weaned babies only.
- Future sale of Eclectus Group logo pins.

Information on the Eclectus Group web-site includes comparison studies of Eclectus subspecies in tables and photographs. Photos include comparisons of pairs, heads, profiles, tails, and juveniles. The Eclectus Group is always looking for good photos of pure subspecies to include on this site.

Articles on diet, nutrition, grooming (wing clipping), breeding, behavior, natural habitat and geography, nursery management, stunted babies resulting from inexperienced hand-feeders, as well as many other problems and experiences are presented.

Selected topics from the discussion list are included on the web-site including feather abnormalities, toe-tapping, etc.

A list of members (who choose to be listed) is also available on the web-site as well as a "sales" and "wanted" page for members.

For more information, check out the Eclectus Group's web-site:

[http://www.homestead.com/
eclectusgrp/files](http://www.homestead.com/eclectusgrp/files)

The web-site is designed and maintained by Gloria Scholbe. Membership information may be obtained from Gloria at 920-826-7478 or email:

globird@lgd.org.

Presently, there are no membership dues. ➔

Treasure of the Solomons

Solomon Islands Eclectus Parrots
by Mary Nogare
Snoqualmie, Washington

Our Eclectus companions and breeder pairs are barely a century away from their counterparts in the wild. They are very much influenced by the instinctive behaviors that would help to ensure survival in their natural habitat. It is important to learn about their origin and their natural life strategies so that we can better understand their behaviors in the foreign environment of our homes. By considering the original need for their natural behaviors, we can help them to adapt their survival skills to our domestic environment and better meet their needs. Thus, problem behaviors can be avoided and a happier, more satisfying arrangement can be secured for our companion birds and for us.

In the following paragraphs, the natural environment, life strategies, and behavior of wild Solomon Islands Eclectus will be briefly described. Also discussed will be how some common behavioral pitfalls were avoided with a domestic-raised pair through observation and an understanding of their natural world.

Environment

The Solomon Islands – a chain of over 900 islands strung over 900 miles in a southeasterly arc starting at Bougainville, Papua New Guinea across the Coral Sea to Vanuatu. The larger islands are Bougainville, Choiseul, New Georgia, Santa Isabel, Guadalcanal, Malaita and Makira. The global address of the chain is between 50 and 150 South latitude, and 1550 and 1700 East longitude, which gives it

a tropical monsoon climate. Temperatures generally range between lows of 75°F and highs of 85°F reaching as high as 90°F in the warmer months of November and December. Humidity is consistently about 80%, and a little lower in the warmer months. Rain falls in every month of the year, averaging about nine inches each month, steadily rising to as much as 12 inches during January to April, the wettest months of the monsoon season which extends from November to April.

The Solomons are situated at a crux of several geologic plates. The direction of the movement of these plates and the pressures produced resulted in several volcanoes, which formed the rocky base of the Solomon Islands and other islands in the area. Over time, the rocky islands were colonized by corals and reef-forming organisms. Other coral islands and atolls also formed. This, combined with the warm, wet climate, encouraged the development of soils, and colonization by plant and animal life.

The complexion of the Solomon Islands chain then, varies from geologically active, rugged, mountainous, rainforested islands with steep valleys to low-lying coral atolls. Soils range from volcanic and fertile to relatively infertile limestone. These soils are home to a wide variety of plants and trees such as ferns, orchids, palms, mangroves, casuarinas, and many fruit and nut producing species. These rich food sources are exploited by reptiles, including the largest of the prehensile tailed skinks, the Solomon Island Skink, *Corucia zebrata*, mammals, such as many species of fruit bats, and birds, including several species of fruit doves and parrots.

Eclectus Parrots

Forshaw's *Parrots of the World* indicates there are 11 species of parrots on the Solomon Islands. These include several Lorries (Loriidae), the Ducorps Cockatoo, *Cacatua ducorpsii*, Singing Parrot, *Geoffroyus heterochlitus*, and the Solomon Islands Eclectus Parrot, *Eclectus roratus solomonensis*.

The genus *Eclectus* is monotypic with nine recognized subspecies. All of these, in nature, inhabit the general area of New Guinea and the surrounding islands, and the Cape York Peninsula in Australia. Each subspecies inhabits a different part of this area, and is unique from each other subspecies in such characteristics as size, conformation, color, vocalizations, and the length of time necessary to mature and to hatch and raise the chicks. These differences indicate that the subspecies have been distinct from each other for a long period of time.

In *Parrots of the World*, Forshaw describes a theory that Rainbow Lorries, *Trichoglossus haematodus*, may have spread into their current range from New Guinea, and proposes the possibility that the original population of *Eclectus* parrots may have done this as well. At this time, it is not known where the founding population of the *Eclectus* subspecies may have originated, nor is it known for certain how the population spread from island to island. As *Eclectus* are strong fliers, they may have simply flown to closer islands, however they may have moved to more distant regions borne on the winds of typhoons or other storms that move through the region. They may also have moved over islands or "land bridges" exposed during raising and lowering of sea levels during various climatic changes.

By whatever means this occurred, once separated, the original population would have continued to follow its evolutionary path in its location. The daughter population would follow its own path, reinforcing the genetic traits of its smaller number of members and changing in response to its new environment, creating a separate subspecies.

The following is a list of the subspecies, with a common name and a brief note on their distribution as indicated in *Parrots of the World*:

- *E. r. macgillivrayi**
Macgillivray Eclectus
Cape York, Australia
- *E. r. vosmaeri*
Vosmaer Eclectus

Larger islands in the northern and central Moluccas

- *E. r. aruensis**
-Aru Eclectus
-Aru Islands
- *E. r. polychloros**
-Red-sided Eclectus
-New Guinea, western Papuan islands, Kai (Indonesia)
- *E. r. biaki**
-Biaki Eclectus
-Biak Island West Irian
- *E. r. cornelia*
-Cornelia Eclectus
-Sumba in the Lesser Sunda Islands
- *E. r. roratus*
-Grand Eclectus
-Buru, Ceram, Amboina, southern Moluccas
- *E. r. solomonensis**
-Solomon Islands Eclectus
-Solomon Islands, Bismarck Archipelago, Admiralty Islands
- *E. r. riedeli*
-Riedel's Eclectus
-Tanimbar Islands

* denotes "blue-eye-ring" subspecies

Details of the range, specific island names and descriptions, and measurements of the different subspecies of *Eclectus* Parrots can be found in many sources, including *Parrots of the World*.

Eclectus are the most sexually dimorphic of parrots, which means the males and females look very different. Other unusual characteristics of *Eclectus* are that they also have a feathered cere and the ends of their body feathers are "hair-like." Four of the subspecies are common in aviculture. In approximate order of size (largest to smallest) these are *vosmaeri*, *polychloros*, *roratus* and *solomonensis*.

A detailed description of the Solomon Islands *Eclectus* follows:

Solomon Island *Eclectus* Parrot, *Eclectus r. solomonensis* Rothchild and Hartert 1901

Length: The *solomonensis* subspecies have a large distribution range in the wild that corresponds to a big difference in their size and length. They have a marked geographic size variation with the western (islands) birds being the same size as the similar appearing Red-sided *Eclectus* and the eastern (islands) birds being much

smaller in size and length. Those *solomonensis* in captivity are from the eastern range of the island group and thus are small in size. The length of these parrots is 33-34 cm (13-13.5 inches), making it among the smallest of all the *Electus* subspecies.

Distribution: Originates through the Bismarck Archipelago (Umboi, New Britain, the Wuti Islands, Lolobau, Wotam, Duke of York, New Ireland, New Hanford, Tabar, Lihir, Tanga, and Feni), the Admiralty Archipelagos (Manus and Rambutyo) and through the Solomon Island group including Buku and Bougainville east to San Cristobal and its satellites.

Male

Male *Electus* were first described by Scopoli in the 1700s. Generally, male plumage is predominantly a light green becoming slightly more yellow around the head. The green color is slightly different for each subspecies. There are wide red patches on either side of the body under the wings. The wing bend and edges of the primary flight feathers are edged in blue, and the under wing coverts are red. Upper tail feathers are a lighter green than the body plumage and are slightly tipped in pale yellow. Feathers toward the outer edges of the tail are slightly suffused with blue. The upper mandible is a rich orange which is darker at the base and paler at the tip, creating the "candy corn" coloration of the beak. The lower mandible is black. The iris of the mature male is deep orange, the legs are grey and the nails black.

Female

Female *Electus* were not described until 1837. Generally, female plumage is predominantly a rich red, which becomes more maroon red across the back and upper wings. There is a broad area of blue or purple coloration extending across the lower breast and abdomen, and up around the back of the neck as the mantle. The bend in the wing and the outer edges of the primaries are blue and under wing coverts are purple. Both the upper and lower mandible are matte black. The

iris of the mature female is pale to creamy yellow, the legs grey, and the nails black. In some subspecies, a ring of tiny blue feathers is present around the eye, called an eye-ring.

It is interesting to note that prior to 1837, male and female *Electus* were not recognized by the scientific community as belonging to the same species.

Natural Behaviors and Life Strategies

Electus Parrots in the wild generally prefer lowland secondary forests and open woodland below 3,000 feet or so. They are less common in the primary forests, possibly due to the greater humidity.

Foods consumed are procured primarily from the forest canopy – leaves, stems, leaf buds, fruits, nuts, and blossoms. A review of the flora of the Solomon Islands indicates some possible food plants to be the coconut palm (flowers and young fruits), casuarina leaf shoots (noted in *Parrots of the World*), a wide variety of palm, the Orleans plum, *Marantbes corymbosa*, and Burdekin plum, *Pleiogynium timoriense*. Figs, which occur throughout Indonesia and New Guinea, are also relished. Plant foods provided by human settlement include corn (maize), a local grain called "pitpit," bananas, and yams. Although *Electus* do not generally go to the ground to feed, when humans harvest the yams, they cut off less desirable sections, leaving them on the ground – which the parrots then descend to consume. It should be noted that in some areas of their range, *Electus* Parrots are considered to be pests of some human food crops, particularly grain.

The beak of the *Electus* Parrot seems to be poorly designed for cracking hard nuts, and well designed for snipping leaf shoots, piercing thick-skinned fruits or soft-hulled nuts, scraping fibrous stems, and peeling bark from twigs and small branches. The digestive tract of the *Electus* Parrot is longer than that of most parrots. This facilitates the digestion of a coarse diet, and the absorption of nutrients

gleaned from such a diet, especially beta carotenes, which the *Electus* Parrot requires in abundance.

Electus Parrots can breed year-round, however on the Solomon Islands they may reduce their breeding activities during the monsoon/cyclone season. Nesting sites preferred are cavities or hollows in the trunks of tall trees, often palms, which can be enlarged to suit the birds. They will excavate into the center of the trunk where the wood is softest, then downward for three feet or more, then continue modifying the cavity into the nest chamber.

Once the nest site is identified, the pair must defend it from other *Electus*, other bird species, or animals also seeking nest sites. The pair must also defend it from predators. The female tends to remain near her nest, even if she does not have eggs or chicks, perhaps to dissuade potential usurpers. When out of the nest cavity, she tends to avoid the ends and tops of trees, seeming to prefer deeper foliage, or positions near tree trunks. The male tends to occupy locations in the canopy or toward the ends of branches. The male gathers food among the trees, which he brings in his crop to feed the female, especially when she is incubating eggs or brooding chicks. During this time, the female leaves the nest only to eliminate or other brief, necessary purposes. The female alone incubates her clutch of two eggs and broods the chicks, although the male may also occupy the nest cavity from time to time.

In her nest hole, the female *Electus* and any eggs or chicks can be very vulnerable to predators. On the Solomon Islands, these predators include endemic Giant Rats (*Uromys imperator* and *Solomys ponceleti*) and ground and tree boas (*Candioia* spp.). Interestingly, *Candioia* spp are extremely variable in color. The Solomon Islands Ground Boa, *C. carniata paulsoni*, can be grey, gold, yellow, tan, red, orange, lavender, white or silver. This boa has a zig-zag pattern along the body and can change color. The Solomon Islands Tree Boa, *C.*

observers may have simply seen more males than females, and come to an erroneous conclusion.

Natural Behaviors and the Companion Eclectus

The power and importance of understanding something about the natural life strategies and behaviors, and applying this knowledge to our breeding and companion Eclectus, cannot be overemphasized. To illustrate, at one time, Eclectus Parrots were considered to be delicate and nearly impossible to keep alive in captivity. The birds were fed a diet of mostly seed. On such a diet the Eclectus, already stressed by the rigors of importation, soon languished and died.

We now know the Eclectus Parrot requires a diet high in beta carotene and fiber such as that contained in

greens, vegetables, and fruits to be healthy, alert and active. The lifespan of the Eclectus in captivity is now considered to be at least 30 years. It is likely that if the diet of the Eclectus in the wild were observed and relied upon in the past, many years of needless lethargy, disease and death by malnutrition could have been avoided.

What other problems can a knowledge of wild Eclectus help us to understand and avoid?

This is some of the advice we received from several sources when researching Eclectus for our companions: Eclectus hens are a poor choice for a companion parrot. They scream, pick their feathers and/or toenails and bite apparently for no reason. They are feisty and difficult to handle. Males are gentle and companionable, and much better choices for pets, but they are feather-pickers and bite unexpectedly, so you must be careful. Definitely do not get a female Eclectus unless you have a lot of experience with parrots.

Although we had never owned a parrot before, ultimately we decided on a pair Solomon Islands Eclectus, who we named Cabernet and Chardonnay (Cabby and Chardy for short). Through our research, we decided these parrots seemed to best suit our lifestyle and abilities. We did take to heart the well-intentioned caveats we had received. We would socialize our babies as well as we could, and watch for the beginnings of the problem behaviors we had been warned about. We would also continue to study Eclectus parrots for clues to understanding these behaviors. The following are some of our experiences and observations with our pair.

Cabby and Chardy – Stories

Cabby and Chardy came to us from their breeder completely weaned and well socialized. They were adorable, friendly, playful baby birds. Although we knew babies are more compliant, we had not seen any problem behaviors, and had filed the warnings away “in the back of our minds.”

- One day when Cabby, our

female, was about 18 months old, she was sitting in my hand as she often does. She seemed to be agitated, and started chewing on her toenails. This was not preening, which we were familiar with. This was an almost desperate chewing. We remembered one of the warnings we had received – but at the same time, remembered something from our research – female Solomon Islands Eclectus begin to mature at around 18-24 months of age, depending on the individual. They also chew and excavate a nest hole. In one article, the author had even mentioned that if a hen is not provided with soft wood to chew, she could chew her toenails or feathers. We gave Cabby a soft wood stick toy. She promptly began to chew it in preference to her toenails. When she had chewed it to “tooth-picks” we gave her another, then another. She chewed several of these sticks to splinters before she seemed to be satisfied.

- One evening at about this same time, we were sitting on the sofa watching some TV. We had Cabby and Chardy with us as usual. Cabby was playing on a little ledge behind the back sofa cushions like she often does. I rested my elbow on the cushions as I got comfortable on the sofa. Cabby ran over to me – then she growled and bit my elbow. I moved my elbow and she resumed playing. I replaced my arm. She ran back over to my arm with eyes pinning. I moved my arm off and again the attack ceased. She was protecting “her place.”

We decided the place she was defending as hers was an acceptable play area for her. We placed some large towels over it and put her wooden stick toys and twigs in it. She hopped into her “place” and began happily chewing up the sticks and tunneling under the towels. She would pull her sticks into her towel tunnel with her to chew them, then scratch in her tunnel – like a chicken. Bits of twigs and toys would fly everywhere. Every few days, we would shake the splinters out of the towels, and replace the chewed sticks with fresh ones.

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Why did we not simply place a wooden toy in her cage and let her chew it there? The problem was that Cabby could not really get her beak or feet onto the toy to tear it and chew it up. A centrally located toy would swing too much and she would quickly lose interest in it. In nature, the tree being excavated does not swing away. Toys located at the edges of the cage or twigs woven through the cage bars were better, but she would chew a piece off, and it would just fall through the cage bars. Thus, we opted for a combination of the toys/twigs on the side of the cage, and the back of the sofa – now called Cabby’s “nest place.”

- As Cabby got older, we began to observe another behavior we associated with maturing – a “hormonal behavior.” She would seem to be looking at the world normally – but if we

Solomon Island Eclactus Parrots. The male to the right, the female below.

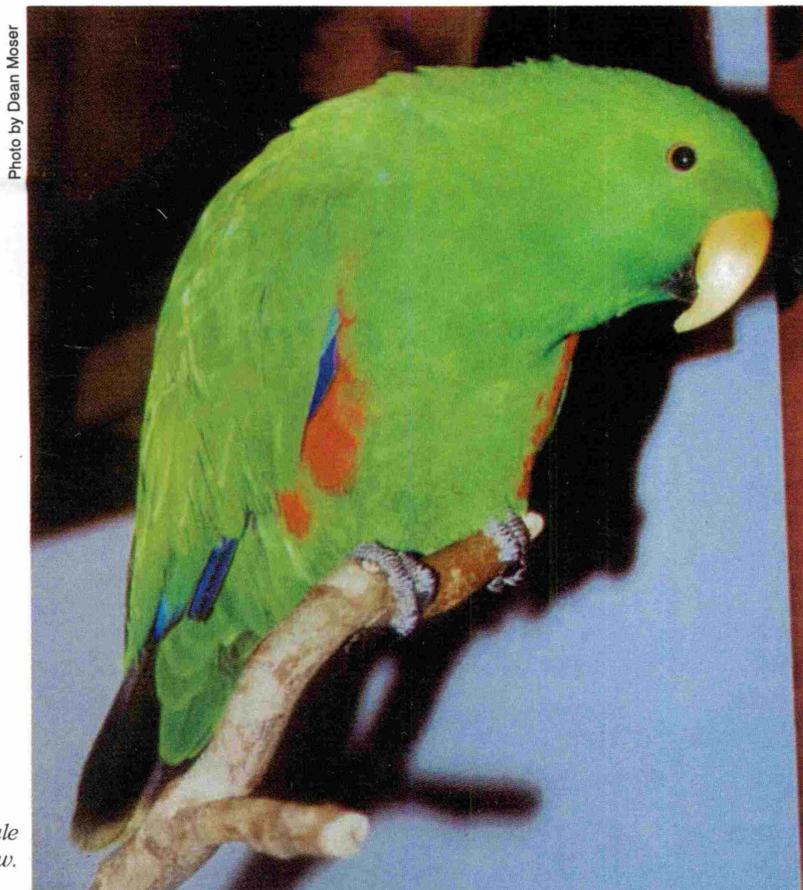


Photo by Dean Moser



Photo by Daria Mirabal

moved, she would jump as if we had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and lunge or bite – hard. Noises or objects would frighten her more easily. With observation, we learned that her “normal” looking eyes were really almost a “glassy stare” – large and dark. Pinning would only happen when the bite was delivered. This behavior would appear periodically – “seasonally.” We called this behavior “hyper-vigilance.” We concluded the behavior must have something to do with defending the nest from predators – bite first and ask questions later or become Tree Boa lunch.

When we observe this behavior starting, we move more slowly and speak more quietly in her presence. We also heighten her sense of security – for example, we hold her closer to us and give her a bit of extra time to come out of her cage if she is reluctant. We have observed these “hormonal behaviors” to increase, peak and diminish over a time frame of about 10 days to two weeks.

- In this same vein, both Cabby and Chardy are afraid of sinuous dark,



Female Solomon Eclectus Parrot taking a stroll in the grass.

brown things, wash cloths, or shirts, or bandannas with zig-zag patterns or “reptile skin” textures (like long-john shirts), sometimes regardless of color. We attribute this to an instinctive fear of predators such as the Giant Rats or the colorful Tree Boa. One time, Cabby even tried to chase my husband Al away from his shirt. It was a green and tan plaid flannel shirt. She examined the shirt, then screamed and bit Al very hard and screamed and bit again. I managed to get her away from Al, but she would not relax. Then he thought that the problem could be that the shirt might look like a reptile. He went into

another room and changed it. When Cabby saw Al again, she quickly relaxed, and was soon playing happily with him. On another occasion, a tan and black bandanna I had rolled up to wear out in the garden sent both birds flying in a panic, screeching their alarm call. I tried to hide the bandanna, but they saw where I had hidden it and screeched at the spot. I finally had to remove it from the room to a place where they could not see me hide it. Even then, for at least an hour they continued to suspiciously watch the place where I had originally hidden it and would not go near that spot.

The Moral of the Stories?

Had we not known about the Eclectus hen’s instinctive imperative to seek out and excavate a nest hole and defend it, nor about the predators that she and her mate react to with instinctive fear and defensive behavior, we may not have provided Cabby with soft wood sticks to chew and a place to chew them. We may not have provided these in time to avoid feather and toenail chewing, frustrated screaming, or “unreasoned” biting.

We may not have understood her “attack” on Al. She might have simply fallen into the unpleasant pattern we

had been warned would be her fate – screaming, picking, and biting – a poor choice for a companion parrot. Just as expected. Instead, we share our home with an affectionate companion female Eclectus Parrot.

What about the warnings we had received regarding the males?

When Chardy was about two years old, an incident occurred while I was cleaning his cage. My sweet little Chardy came over to visit me. He stood in the center of the open cage doorway, struck his beak on the bar (bonked), growled and stared at me. I greeted him and resumed cleaning. Another bonk, another growl and then – he bit me! Again he growled and bonked and stared. Needless to say, I was completely surprised by his unexpected defensive behavior. Then it struck me – defensive behavior – he is two years old now and growing up (Solomon Islands males begin to mature at about 24-30 months of age). He was defending his cage as his territory. I retreated for a short time and let him be “the big man on campus.” In that time, he ceased his defensive behavior and was back to his normal self – playing, sweet and happy. Not many days later, a similar episode occurred – but this time, I knew what he was doing and was prepared. I sat back from the cage, told him what a fine cage he had and what a big boy he was, and moved to clean a different side of the cage. A short time later, I returned to the front of the cage and resumed cleaning. He was his usual self.

Like the females, the males are influenced by their hormones but the expression is from a different point of view. The males seem to stop their territorial, defensive attitude as soon as their “ownership” is acknowledged. If the ownership is challenged, as I made the mistake of doing once in a moment of impatience, the defensive behavior escalates rapidly. Sometimes Chardy will get very focused on his territory (“hot spot”), and his defense does not stop with an acknowledgment. In this case, he is moved to a different room, away from his “hot spot,” breaking the defense pattern and dissi-

pating the behavior. We then limit or avoid allowing him on his “hot spot” until the hormonal urges subside – usually in a week or so.

Observations of Chardy have led us to believe that something else might be true. It is possible that some feather picking behavior in the male Eclectus might be linked to hormones – not the increase in hormones, but the normal drive of increased hormones. Chardy overpreens and barbers (snips off) his feathers during the times that Cabby is “hormonal.” This is not due to her chasing him or harassing him as she rarely does that. One of the worst episodes of barbering occurred when Cabby had been in her nest box on eggs for two weeks – he had seen her only to feed her or stand guard at the entry to the nestbox. The barbering seemed to be a reaction to being in courtship/breeding condition even more so than possible boredom.

We thought about what might be causing this “seasonal” feather picking to happen. Possibly, he was instinctively predisposed to expend extra energy foraging for food to provide for his mate and, soon, for chicks. In theory, his body might be preparing him to feed a total of four birds! Living in our home in a cage with food provided just a few feet away at most, he was not able to do that which he needed to do – fly and forage. Our solution was to give Chardy the opportunity to increase his activity level – more flapping exercise and more foods and twigs to peel, open or chew. We have had some success, as Chardy has stopped overpreening and barbering his primaries and tail feathers. We are hopeful that this continued regimen will expend his energies in more appropriate ways, and that he will no longer barber or overpreen his feathers.

Thinking about the reasons behind Chardy’s biting and barbering helped us. We recognized his defensive behavior for what it was – not “unexpected biting” but territory defense – and we soon could deal with it appropriately whenever it would start. We believe we understand at least some of his feather barbering, and are working out ways to

help him express his instinctive needs in the environment of our home.

Conclusion

We now believe that the warnings we received when researching our Eclectus were both true and untrue. They were true in that some kinds of problematic behavior problems can develop and may even be likely to develop if we do not take the time to learn about our parrots’ natural instincts. The warnings were untrue in their implication that the development of these behaviors was inevitable and unavoidable, and that only those experienced with parrots should consider Eclectus as companions.

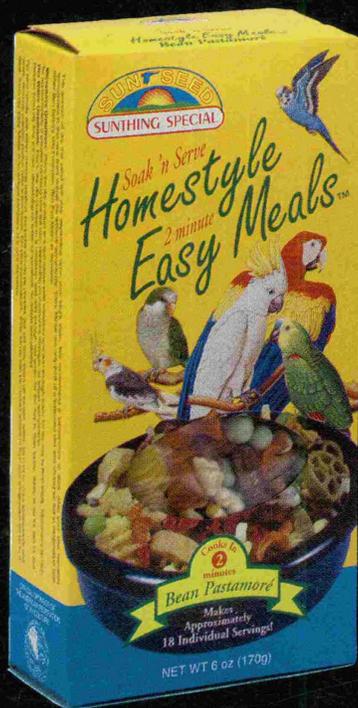
A final note of interest regarding the Solomon Islands – the first documented European contact was made in 1568 by the Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendana. Mendana discovered alluvial gold on Guadalcanal, and possibly thinking he had found a source of great wealth, named the islands the “Isles of Solomon.”

Although gold did not become a source of wealth for the islands, a perhaps far greater jewel dwelt there arrayed more gloriously than King Solomon might ever have dreamed of – the Eclectus Parrot, treasure of the Solomon Islands. 

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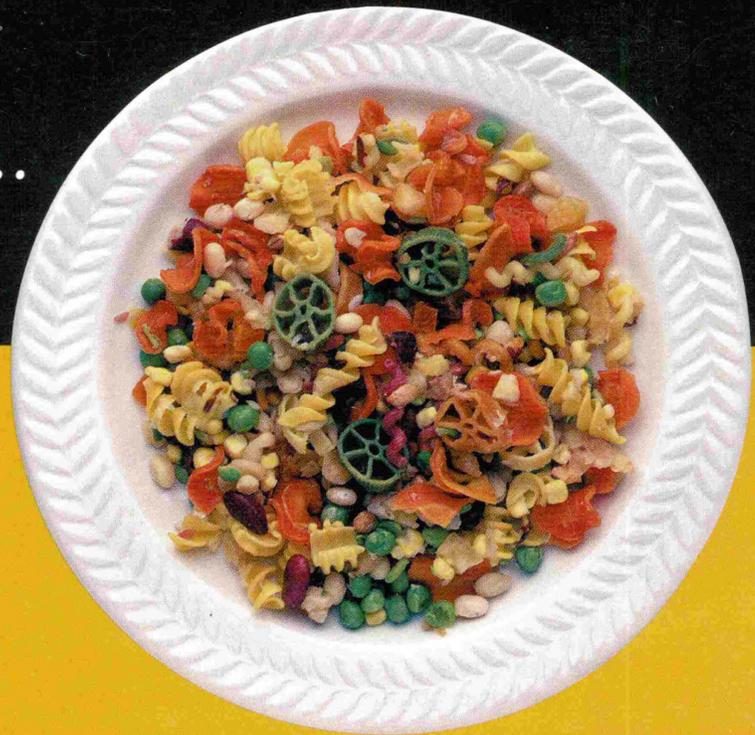


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